The Buddha and the Christ: Looking at Jesus through Buddhist Eyes

Introduction

When people think of Buddhism and Christianity, they usually think of two very different, yet very popular religious traditions, which diverge in many significant respects in the areas of belief systems and practices. For the topic, “Looking at Jesus through Buddhist Eyes,” I will use John Renard’s Comparative Theology Model 3, Inter-Textual method (1998:9, 10), which describes how one community reads another’s texts to explore situations and texts of the Zen Buddhist religious tradition to determine how Jesus Christ is viewed.

As a general rule, one can use this model to study situations and texts in which the scripture of one tradition directly engages or explicitly discusses its relationship to another tradition’s scripture. I chose to use this model as a method of how one community (the Christian community) reads another’s history and texts within Zen Buddhism. It is understandable that much can be viewed as polemical; however, I have tried to yield to the cross-cultural, anthropological, and religious understanding of one tradition to another, while maintaining my own Christian views in order to encourage serious theological engagement beyond the need of apologetics. The specific focus of this article is on historical circumstances that gave rise to the engagement and the relationship between the issues discussed while intertwining them with religious and cultural understanding.

Ruben Habito suggests that it is recognized that “to profess adherence or commitment to a particular religious tradition is to take the teachings of that religion as absolute truth and its prescriptions for living as absolutely authoritative” (2003:362). Therefore, it is important to understand that this paper is not an attempt to convert the reader, but rather to help Christians understand a non-theist religion. “This representation of the teachings...
of Jesus from the perspective of Buddhism attempts to reconcile mystical teachings transcribed to everyday language in both traditions. It does not claim to complete commonalities of the religions or cultures” (Falvey 2002:19). I am more interested in developing mutual understanding and acceptance of people from two radically different religions.

In order to determine how the Zen Buddhist views Jesus Christ, I will first present a brief history of Zen, including a brief overview of the life of the Buddha. Because I am assuming a Christian readership, I will not do the same for Christianity, as it pertains to the life of Jesus. Then I will look at the central figures of Buddhism and Christianity (i.e., Buddha and Jesus Christ), and finally, consider similarities and differences between the teachings of Jesus Christ and Buddha.

Who Is the Zen Buddhist? A Brief History of Zen

What is Buddhism? Jack Maguire says that “Buddhism is one of the five most popular religions in the world today, along with Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism” (2001:xi). Buddhism originated in India sometime during the 6th century BCE and over time spread across various parts of Asia (Ross 1980:3). As it spread to China, Korea, Japan, and into Southeast Asia, many different cultural forms of Buddhism emerged. The three main forms or vehicles of Buddhism are, (1) Theravada; (2) Mahayana, and (3) Vajrayana (Maguire 2001:3). Zen belongs to the Mahayana tradition.

The Mahayana tradition, meaning Great Vehicle, formally started around the 1st or 2nd centuries BCE as a reform movement within early Buddhism. Its intention was to make “liberation possible for a wider number of people than just professed monks” (Maguire 2001:35) as well as to emphasize the importance of bringing all sentient beings to enlightenment, not just oneself. Buddhism traveled from India to China around the 4th or 5th century and was called the Ch’an and then made its way to Japan. Zen Buddhism arrived in Japan as early as the 7th century, but did not develop to any significant extent until sometime around the 12th century. Zen is said to be a blend of Taoism and Mahayana teachings. Zen is a Japanese word derived from the Sanskrit word dhyana. Dhyana is when meditation leads to Nirvana. Nirvana is the ultimate state of a person free from suffering and individual existence. Zen Buddhism focuses on attaining enlightenment or bodhi. Bodhi, in Buddhism, is the final enlightenment, which puts an end to the cycle of transmigration and leads to Nirvana, or spiritual release. The Zen Buddhist focuses on enlightenment through meditation in imitation of Siddharta Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. Buddhists, in traveling a path toward enlightenment assume that all human beings have the Buddha nature, or the potential to attain enlightenment, within them.
As Joseph Spae points out, “The Christian view of the world starts with ‘the tree of knowledge’, whereas the Buddhist world is the outcome of ignorance. . . . From the Buddhist point of view, Christians are all the time rushing into ignorance when they think they are increasing the amount of knowledge by logica acumen and analytical subtlety” (1980:177). Because of this, it is said that the Buddha nature has been clouded by an ignorance, which can take the shape of too much false knowledge. To overcome this ignorance, Zen rejects the study of scriptures, religious rites, devotional practices, and good works in favor of meditation leading to a sudden breakthrough of insight and awareness of ultimate reality. Because Buddhism does not incorporate the study of scriptures, but rather uses Buddhist teachings to guide one to directly experience reality, training in the Zen path is usually undertaken by a disciple under the guidance of a master or teacher.

Zen teaches the possibility of enlightenment in the here and now, unlike the tendency that has developed in other strands of Buddhism where nirvana is a far-off goal. Zen teaches that enlightenment is a spontaneous event, totally independent of concepts, techniques, or rituals. Zen monks focus on doing things and learning through experience. Zen is said to appeal to people because of its emphasis on the uselessness of words and the insistence on action without thought.

Although Zen was created almost one thousand years after Buddha’s death, this form of Buddhism is considered to be a return to Buddha’s emphasis on meditation. Zen is basically about “finding out for one’s self” (Ross 1980:142). Because of this, Zen has made its way rather rapidly to the West, where its practices are quite popular. “Zen ironically has come to rival, if not outstrip most other branches of Buddhism in the multiplicity of writings about it or central to it” (Ross 1980:141).

The Historical Figure of Buddha

Who Is Buddha: The Birth

The Buddha was born [in 566 B.C.E.] into the childless royal family of the Shakya Kingdom, located in the Himalayan foothills of what we now call southern Nepal. His clan name was Guatama. Prior to his conception, his mother, Queen Maya, wife of King Sudhodhana, had taken a spiritual vow of celibacy. However, one night, as she slept in her chaste bed in the rose marble palace in Kapilavastu, she had a wondrous dream: Into her bedroom strode a magnificent white elephant with six dazzling white tusks. His trunk arched gracefully above his head, holding aloft a perfect golden lotus flower. He knelt beside her bed and caressed her right side with the flower. At that very moment, she felt charged with new life and woke up. (Maguire 2001:3)
As the story goes on, the queen woke up and told her husband about her dream. Her husband then requested that his chief counselor interpret it. The interpretation was that “you will give birth to a son destined for greatness” (Maguire 2001:3). It is further said that a series of miraculous events happened as the queen gave birth (lotus flowers fell from the sky, a tree branch bent forward for her to grasp hold of, fragrant smells of jasmine and sandalwood rose from the earth, she experienced a birth without pain, etc.). She named her son Siddhartha.

Shortly after Siddhartha’s birth, the queen died. No specific time frame of her death has been documented. Siddhartha, raised by his aunt, his mother’s sister, later married his cousin at the age of 16. At the age of 29 his first child was born and he began his quest for a more spiritually enriched life rather than living as a privileged prince. After Siddhartha’s child was born he began to think about the cycle of birth and death and his now seemingly frivolous lifestyle. He also rebelled against the restrictive, authoritarian role he would need to assume as a father (Maguire 2001:6). He decided to give up his personal love for his family and pursue life as a monk. It is said that later in time, the Buddha traveled aimlessly around in search of enlightenment. In short, Siddhartha encountered 24 past Buddha’s, learned from them all and became the 25th (Appleton 2012:11).

What Does Buddha Mean to the Zen Buddhist?

The bodhisattva, better known as the Buddha, is known to all forms of Buddhism but is much more central to Mahayana than to other forms of Buddhism. Not by definition, but by derived implication, a bodhisattva is a future Buddha, someone who has taken the vow to achieve complete perfect unsurpassable enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. In Zen Buddhism, this is the ideal of all serious adherents of the religion and most take the bodhisattva vow. The bodhisattva vow places an emphasis not on the ultimate goal of final enlightenment, but on the intermediate lives of the bodhisattva, who trains ceaselessly in wisdom and method, and who is willing to go to any lengths or make any sacrifice that would help others progress spiritually (Gross 1999:72).

Buddha is not viewed as the Creator to the Buddhist. In fact, there is no creator in the Buddhist religion. Nor is Buddha viewed as omnipotent. Yet, to the Buddhist, the Buddha is not a passive being; he is one who will use his wisdom to help other living beings when they are open to his advice. Buddha for the Buddhist incorporates all things of this world and not of this world. Buddha is the future person, what the Buddhist is striving to become, the awakened one. Buddha to the Buddhist, would embody some of what Jesus means to the Christian.
The Zen Buddhist View of Jesus Christ

How does the Zen Buddhist view Jesus Christ? As a Seventh-day Adventist I found this to be a very pertinent question that kept coming to the forefront as I was doing research for this paper. This question kept reoccurring because I found myself wondering why I was so intrigued with a non-theist religion that does not even think God (Jesus) exists at all? Within my research I found there was little to be said about the Zen Buddhist views of Jesus in a negative sense. Buddhists would have great difficulty with Christian theological claims about Jesus, such as Jesus being one and the same as God, but they would have an expressed admiration for the historical Jesus based on their varied readings of the four New Testament Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

Not unexpectedly, “the most frequently expressed difficulty focused on Christian claims of Jesus’ divinity and uniqueness and the Christian assertion of the necessity of Jesus for the salvation for all human beings” (Gross 2001:77). For example, I spoke with a practicing Zen Buddhist, who shared with me that the Buddhists agree with most of the philosophies of the prophets in the Christian Bible. This provided much reflective and contemplative thought. If Jesus is viewed as a prophet, then there is no denying his presence as a historical person here on earth. I then inquired about what the Buddhist might believe about Jesus’ philosophies and teachings. I was then informed that the average Buddhist agrees with Jesus’ philosophies and teachings and that of his disciples. This said a lot, and showed that the average Buddhist does not have a problem with Jesus Christ as a real historical person or with his teachings. This meant, they are not saying that he never existed, which provides some basis for a beginning of understanding.

Furthermore, there are some historical writings that state that some Buddhists believed that Jesus Christ was the reincarnate of Buddha. Some have viewed the similarity in the birth of Buddha and Christ to be so uncanny that they believe Jesus was the reincarnate of Buddha. Nevertheless, Katsumi Takizawa and Seiichi Yagi say, “In Jesus Christ the possibility of secondary contact has become manifest. He is the primal image of the true God-man and in this is the criterion for our own humanity” (2001:104). For Zen Buddhists Jesus is the image and character Buddhists are to strive to become. If Buddhists are to behold and become the image of Jesus Christ, he is then made the center and all ego will be disbursed and the result will be enlightenment. This is similar to what I have been taught as an Adventist: that I must put on Christ, become like him, and strive to be perfect like God the Father is perfect.
Because there is not much written about Jesus’ childhood, many Buddhists believe the practices and teachings of Jesus have been derived from the teachings of Buddha and that he learned it during his childhood while traveling through India. While from a Christian perspective this is not believed to be true, we can say that many Zen Buddhists do believe in Jesus Christ as a historical person.

I also found that many Western Zen Buddhists have actually had some form of Christianity implemented into their culture and lifestyle, either through growing up in a culture where Christianity was wide-spread, or by growing up in a Christian family. Because of this interfaith experience, Spae says, “the Buddhist-Christian influence is mutual and universal” (1980:189). However, even those Zen Buddhists who have been influenced by Christianity will say, “Zen forms the background to my thought. . . Zen is about the authentic grasp of actual reality” (Takizawa and Yagi 2001:98).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddhist Terms</th>
<th>Gospel or Christian Terms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Insight and/or Enlightenment</td>
<td>Heaven or the Kingdom of God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress, frustration, anxiety, pain, or suffering</td>
<td>Hell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truth, Natural Law (the real nature of all things)</td>
<td>Omnipresent cycles (God)</td>
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<td>The spirit felt in moments of insight</td>
<td>The Divine; heavenly love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Realization of the possibility of the Truth</td>
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Figure 1. Taken from “The Buddha’s Gospel: A Buddhist interpretation of Jesus’ Words” (Falvey 2002:18).

**Similarities and Differences between Jesus Christ and Buddha**

Both the Buddha and Jesus Christ had many points of views that they agreed on and which could be viewed as commonalities. While they agreed in one sense, those same similarities that people say form a common union or bond of agreement also rather quickly create points of disagreement. Both Buddha and Christ saw problems with the human ego such as pride, arrogance, greed, etc., all things that are biproducts of the human ego. While Buddha saw that the ego is the result of arrogance, which was the result of pain, Jesus saw ego as sin. “Pain centers in the self; sin is a matter of personal relations. Both saw the authenticity of human existence in overcoming the absolutization of the relative, especially of the ego. Once this overcoming has been achieved, one becomes aware
of the deeper ground: dharma (religious truth) in the former; the Reign of God, in the latter” (Yagi 1990:310). While both agreed (and then disagreed to a certain extent), the two views come together again at the end of this perspective in the aspect of the need to be free from both the pain and sin.

Words have the creative power to affect change. Buddhists believe that everything in the universe carries a frequency of vibration. Our words are no different. Second only to thought, words are extremely powerful tools that create our world. If you are of the Christian faith then you believe Creation began with the spoken word. Buddhists use the power of the word to chant “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” attuning their lives to the rhythm of the universe, which they believe is perfect. The intonation of the Sanskrit word Om is said to be so powerful that a vibration is created in the body, which attunes to the same vibration of the universe. If you pray, if you bless, if you chant, if you sing, if you advise, if you write, if you read, if you teach and even if you just listen, then you believe in the awesome creative power of words.

Another example that Lindsey Falvey points out is the Buddhist interpretation of Jesus’ words and the commonalities they may have with Buddhist terms, as seen in the chart below:

As Falvey’s chart above shows, insight and/or enlightenment is interpreted as heaven or the Kingdom of God by Buddhists. However, be very clear that there is no biblical heaven for the Buddhist. To the Buddhist, heaven is here on earth. Once a person reaches enlightenment, this is simply how they would compare the teachings of Jesus Christ to that of their own. Stress, frustration, anxiety, pain, and/or suffering are translated by the Buddhist as hell. If you live a life of selfish, evil desires, the Buddhist believes that you will have your hell right here on earth if you do not overcome wrong desires. Truth, (natural law which is the real nature of all things) is translated to mean God or the omnipresent cycles of God. The spirit felt in moments of insight, are similar to the Divine, or heavenly love, from the Buddhist perspective. Finally, awareness is translated by the Buddhist as realization of the possibility of the Truth. You can see how on one hand Buddhists perceive these commonalities and/or similarities. Nevertheless, most Christians would reject most of these comparisons because of the deeper biblical and spiritual meanings.

Summary and Conclusion

I realize that this research does not present the complete teachings of Zen Buddhism, nor does it attempt to reconcile Zen Buddhist thoughts with the teachings of Jesus. Rather it seeks to provide a brief overview of the beliefs of Zen Buddhism and their views of Jesus Christ. The Buddha is widely perceived to be more mystical than Jesus Christ in the eyes of
Christians and Jesus Christ is perceived to be more of a reincarnation to some Zen Buddhists. Other Zen Buddhists feel the great Prophet (Jesus) adopted a lot of his teachings from the great Buddha. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, Zen Buddhists have their own way of adopting an understanding of Jesus Christ.

It is surprising that many Zen Buddhists accept Jesus as an historical man who performed many miracles. While it is true that their acceptance of Jesus is not in the normal Christian way, I wonder if even their imperfect understanding could be a beginning point to introduce Buddhists to the Jesus Christ Christians know? I believe we (Christians and Buddhists) are climbing different mountains, but we are both looking to overcome similar inner challenges. If we think about it, in Jesus’ walk on earth, he was predominantly around crowds of people who were polar opposites of him in character and religious beliefs. It was his acceptance of all kinds of people that was the first thing that moved many of them to want to learn more about him and his God (the Father).

If we are to be true Christians, should we not behave as Jesus and embrace all people in the same way? Think about the miraculous and wonderful things he did and among whom these wonders were performed. Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally believed that people are judged on the basis of the light they have.

Our standing before God depends, not upon the amount of light we have received, but upon the use we make of what we have. Thus, even the heathen who chooses the right as far as they can distinguish it, are in a more favorable condition than are those who have had great light, and profess to serve God, but who disregard the light, and by their daily life contradict their profession. (White 1940:239)

We often do not know who is living up to the light they have received. Therefore, we should be kind and continue to relate in Christ-like ways with people regardless of how they respond or how they behave (Matt 5:16).

I conclude this paper with a quote by Nhat Hanh, that embodies the Buddhist love and acceptance for Jesus: “The Buddha and Jesus have to meet every moment in each of us. Each of us in our daily practice needs to touch the spirit of the Buddha and the spirit of Jesus so that they manifest. . . . It is just like cooking. If you love French cooking, it does not mean that you are forbidden to love Chinese cooking. . . . You love the apple; yes, you are authorized to love the apple, but no one prevents you from also loving the mango” (1999:202). When I initially read this, I thought it was a pluralist way of thinking, and it very well may be. However, in one way there
is nothing wrong with observing other cultures or taking part in some of their activities. Furthermore, after much contemplation, I believe that we as Christians are to love—love all people regardless of how different they are from us or how different their beliefs are. We are not to only associate with those who believe like we do; we can love others who are vastly different and who have very different religious beliefs. To not do so would be as despicable as not loving someone because they were from a different culture or a different part of the world. If God is love and we love God, we must exhibit love in all we do. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

Works Cited


Vivian A. Laughlin is currently a PhD student majoring in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology and Anthropology while minoring in Church History. She has served as a paralegal; a missionary teacher in Seoul, Korea; an onsite academic teaching tour guide in Sepphoris/Zippori, Israel; a teaching assistant for the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education in Chicago, Illinois; and an adjunct instructor for Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois. Vivian has done onsite academic research in Australia, Egypt, Greece, Haiti, Italy, Jordan, Israel/Palestine, and Turkey. She has also traveled and done mission work in South Korea and Thailand.